DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 314 480 TM 014 376

AUTHOR Emihovich, Catherine
TITLE Commitment and Change: Qualitative Factors Affecting Successful Program Innovations.
PUB DATE Oct 89
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Evaluation Association (San Francisco, CA, October 19-21, 1989).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Role; Compensatory Education; *Educational Change; Educational Innovation; Elementary Secondary Education; Evaluators; Formative Evaluation; Parent Role; Participation; *Program Evaluation; Program Improvement; Qualitative Research; Self Evaluation (Groups); Teacher Role; *Workshops
IDENTIFIERS *Commitment; Educational Testing Service; *Education Consolidation Improvement Act Chapter 1; Participative Evaluation; Technical Assistance Centers

ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of a qualitative evaluation of the Chapter 1 Program Improvement Workshop Series--Level II, funded by the Educational Testing Service, Technical Assistance Center (TAC), for Region 3. Focus is on the role of commitment in influencing change. The methodological approach, advocated by M. Q. Patton (1986), focuses on: (1) appropriateness, utility, practicality, credibility, and relevance to clients; and (2) "hidden agenda" issues or participants' gut-level reactions to programming. Hidden agenda can only be revealed through direct observation and face-to-face interviews. Factors identified as influencing commitment include information about the program, support at the state level, an emphasis on parent advocacy, and multiple roles played by TAC facilitators. Factors affecting willingness to change included commitment of new administrative personnel and the increased emphasis on the role of the Chapter 1 teacher. Finally, the use of exemplary and innovative programs was emphasized. The use of qualitative techniques of data collection allowed evaluators to play a much stronger role in formative evaluation. (TJH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED314480

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Catherine Emihovich

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

COMMITMENT AND CHANGE: QUALITATIVE FACTORS AFFECTING SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM INNOVATIONS

Catherine Emihovich
Florida State University

TM014376

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Commitment and Change: Qualitative Factors Affecting Successful Program Innovations

Catherine Emihovich

Florida State University

Paper presented at the American Evaluation Association, San Francisco, 1989

A key issue facing any organization is how to facilitate innovative changes within the structure of existing programs. In her landmark study of corporations that were known for their ability to encourage and implement innovative programs, Kanter (1983) developed a definition of innovation which can also be applied to the educational context:

> Innovation refers to the process of bringing any new, problem solving idea into use. Ideas for reorganizing, cutting costs, putting in new budgeting systems [or evaluation systems], improving communication, or assembling products [or defining processes] in teams are also innovations. Innovation is the generation, acceptance, and implementation of new ideas, processes, products, or services. It can thus occur in any part of a corporation [or school], and it can involve creative use as well as original innovation. Application and implementation are central to this definition: it involves the capacity to change or adapt. And there can be many different kinds of innovations, brought about by many different kinds of people: the corporate equivalent of entrepreneurs (Kanter, 1983, pp. 20-21). [Italics added by author of this paper]

Based on this definition, two questions need to be considered: (1) What are the factors which get people to commit to innovative ideas; and, (2) What are the factors which affect their willingness to change and implement these ideas? The purpose of this paper is to suggest that questions of this nature can best be answered through a qualitative investigation, rather than just a comparison of program outcomes across sites. As Cronbach et al. (1980, p. 7) described it, "Merit lies not in the form of inquiry but in the relevance of information."

This paper reports on the results of a qualitative evaluation of the Chapter 1 Program Improvement Workshop Series - Level II, which was funded by the Educational Testing Service, Technical Assistance Center - Region 3. The evaluation had two purposes: to address issues of concern to TAC in terms of whether the workshops were successful in accomplishing their goals and objectives, and to address the concerns of participants in terms of whether they were being provided with services of real value to them, and how new ideas acquired from the workshops were being implemented.

Background context

As part of the U. S. Secretary of Education's initiative to improve the quality of Chapter 1 projects, a national program was begun in 1984 to identify and recognize exemplary Chapter 1 projects, and to disseminate information about

TM014376

these projects. This program was expanded in 1985 to include assistance in helping State and Local Educational Agencies (SEA, LEA) improve the quality of their own Chapter 1 programs. As a means of doing this, the ETS Technical Assistance Center (TAC) - Region 3 set up a series of program improvement workshops to be conducted during a one and a half year cycle from November, 1987 - March, 1989, in various southern states. Assistance from an external evaluator was requested in order to determine the effectiveness of the workshops among the participating SEA's and LEA's. TAC was interested in using an outside evaluator for several reasons: 1). they wanted to learn what was the effective level of intervention by TAC personnel with the SEA and LEA's involved in the project, particularly from the point of view of those receiving the services; 2). because these workshops represented both a new service and a new method of delivery (doing multi-visits in a collaborative format, assessing interaction as well as outcomes), they were interested in learning whether it was effective; and, 3). they hoped the results of this evaluation would lend credibility to this new approach within the field.

One goal of the workshops was to help coordinators become more familiar with the process of program improvement, and to help them view improvement as an on-going activity, rather than as an issue which needed addressing only if the results of the summative evaluation (i.e, NCE gains) were negative. This goal reflects a fundamental shift in the nature of evaluation, in that evaluators become partners in facilitating change, instead of just identifying problem areas and recommending strategies for remediation. As one researcher put it, evaluators become "resources and facilitators whose job it is to develop the skills and confidence of all collective members of a project and to provide whatever support services are necessary for them to achieve what they want." (Kirkup, 1986, p. 76).

A second goal was to provide districts with information and materials that would help guide them in the program improvement process. Before the sessions began, each district was mailed a packet of information which included the following documents: a description of the 13 attributes of exemplary Chapter 1 programs, a selected bibliography organized around topics such as parent involvement, defining goals and objectives, etc., and an interpretation guide for Title 1 evaluation results. During each one of the sessions, participants were also provided with folders crammed full of handouts, forms, booklets, charts, etc. Although several participants noted that much of this was useful information for future reference, several commented that the sheer volume of information was somewhat overwhelming. As one participant put it, "I don't know when they think I'm going to have time to read all this stuff."

Strategies for data collection

The methodological approach followed in this evaluation is the one advocated by Patton (1986), who stated that evaluation methods should be judged on the basis of appropriateness, utility, practicality, credibility, and relevance to clients, and that these criteria are necessarily situational and context-bound. In other words, the methods should allow the evaluator to collect data which fits the clients' needs and interests, and not necessarily conform to an academically derived standard of methodological purity. In designing a

qualitative evaluation, evaluators need to consider further the goals of the evaluation from several perspectives. One perspective is, of course the questions that the client wishes to have addressed. To address the issues raised above, a set of survey questions was developed both from discussions with people in TAC, as well as from the information district people gave in informal interviews.

However, whenever a new program is launched that advertises itself as "different" from usual practice, there are always two agendas to be considered. One agenda might be labeled the "open agenda," which is the set information presented as topics in the workshops, and which is evaluated using a form distributed after the workshops. In general, people tend to respond favorably to these forms, because they are given immediately afterwards before people have had a chance to process what they have learned, and to consider how these new ideas might be implemented. A review of the evaluation data collected by TAC using this format lends credence to this point, since the majority of responses were highly favorable.

The second agenda might be labeled as the "hidden agenda," which is shaped by peoples' "gut level" reactions to what is being presented, as well as by factors influencing acceptance and implementation. This agenda is never captured through formal assessment; it is only visible over time through triangulation of data from observations, interviews, and document analysis. And even with extensive fieldwork, the evaluator never captures it all; undoubtedly, every evaluator (and perhaps every workshop presenter) at some point wishes they could be a fly on the wall when the participants return to their home base and begin discussing the real issues of how these ideas will play in their district. However, a qualitative approach is useful and vitally needed for studying this agenda, since without considering it, real changes in program improvement will not be accomplished.

One example will suffice to illustrate the importance of looking at the "hidden agenda," although many more can be cited. In one of the workshop sessions observed, the topic presented dealt with the issue of coordination between the Chapter 1 teacher and the regular classroom teacher. According to the federal regulations, both teachers should meet on a regular basis to ensure each child in the program is given appropriate instruction. One coordinator referred to this idea as "harmonious action." As the TAC presenter spoke, the audience nodded their heads in agreement, because everyone, of course, agrees with this idea, and everyone feels their school is handling this issue well.

When the whole group broke out into breakout sessions to discuss this topic in more detail, a different picture began to emerge. The first disillusionment centered around the fact of establishing compliance with federal regulations. Several people noted that the state provided almost no guidelines as to what constitutes "optimal" coordination, and virtually no enforcement of whether school districts were in compliance or not. It was obvious that some teachers were irked at others from those schools they knew not to be in compliance, when they were spending a great deal of time in meetings. One elementary coordinator tartly remarked that "more kids' needs can be met if less meetings take place, and if the whole program was streamlined."

A second sore point was the issue of teamwork and administrative support. Although teams are certainly strengthened by the inclusion of administrators, it's also the case that these same administrators can be become somewhat defensive when challenged by the teachers to give reasons for their decisions that impede coordination. For example, several teachers mentioned that scheduling problems made it almost impossible for Chapter 1 and regular classroom teachers to meet, and that in many cases, Chapter 1 teachers had no voice in scheduling at all. One woman said her Chapter 1 teachers went "up in arms" and confronted the principal to reserve a set block of time for meetings. Another coordinator commented upon the "hardened bureaucracy" present in her school and how difficult it was to promote any changes. Her hope was that attending these sessions would give her "ammunition" to push for changes based on changes in the federal regulations.

Two points can be drawn from this example. One, in the flow and ebb of conversation, people's emotions and feelings were much more openly displayed than in the general meeting presentation. If this much feeling is revealed in the case where there was an observer taking notes, then one can only imagine the conversations which occur at the school level, with no observer present. Some of these charged emotions did come through in separate interviews conducted privately away from the sessions. And two, none of this feeling was revealed in the responses to the survey question asking districts to identify their weakest areas. Very few mentioned coordination, even though it is a sensitive issue for many schools. People are often reluctant to reveal sensitive topics when they have to write them down, but are much more willing to be quoted "off the record."

Data which reveal the hidden agenda are not collected through survey questions; they can only be captured successfully through direct observation and face-to-face interviews. Although it is more time-consuming, data of this nature does reveal definitive patterns which can provide a substantive basis both for understanding the process of implementing new innovations, and ensuring that changes made in the program will be adopted by those for whom the program was designed.

Factors influencing commitment to change

The key factors identified as a result which affected the level of commitment were: 1). the Chapter 1 Program Improvement Series brought a renewed sense of commitment to the Chapter 1 program in both states among the participants just from their hearing about new ideas and listening to other districts' experiences; 2). there was strong support at the state level. In both states, either the statewide or area Chapter 1 coordinators were strongly committed to the program, and their support gave people a reason to "buy into it."; 3). a strong emphasis on parent advocacy, making parents feel more committed to the program by giving them a stronger voice in their children's education. One way proposed by several districts was a direct linkage between school and community resources; and, 4). the multiple roles played by the TAC facilitators.

Each one of the factors identified above had its own stories associated with it. Concerning the renewed sense of commitment, one supervisor reported

that her teachers just "blossomed" under staff development; she believed strongly that "teachers need to commit themselves to personal growth." She also felt that this program had the state department of education's sanction to promote staff development in the schools. This aspect was important to this supervisor, since she noted her superintendent was "not real keen" on staff development, and these workshops gave her a greater sense of authority in pushing for more staff development in her school district. Another district Chapter 1 Director talked about the need to "hold hands and work on our problems together."

Another important factor was strong support at the state level. In both states, either the statewide or area Chapter 1 coordinators were strongly committed to the program, and their support gave people a reason to "buy into it." One reason for their support was that they saw these workshops as a more effective means of delivery of services; "the DOE could reach more people this way." The need for early intervention was also recognized; by using this service, the coordinators had a better handle on which districts really needed help. This was painfully obvious during the observation of a private conference with one "troubled" district. It became clear that the district team had no idea how to use the student trace, and that they really didn't understand the data (particularly the interpretation of test scores for both placement and evaluation) they were asked to bring. If the state had waited until this district sent in their yearly evaluation form which indicated no NCE gains (or worse, slippage from the year before), remediation would come too late (assuming, of course, that the DOE had the money and personnel to make on-site visits). But by having this district come to the workshops, their problems could be identified and discussed in a setting where help was more readily available.

A third factor is the idea of parent advocacy, i.e., making parents feel more committed to the program by giving them a stronger voice in their children's education. One way proposed by several districts was a direct linkage between school and community resources. For example, schools could be considered as a resource for the whole community, and not just be used on a 7 a.m.- 3 p.m. basis. This is a revisiting of an old idea proposed by Ivan Illich in the 1960's, but perhaps the time has come for the educational establishment to consider more innovative uses of schools than just educational centers for children. Already in Florida there is serious discussion at the state level of making social services available in the schools, so there is a more effective coordination of care for abused and neglected children.

Finally, a very important factor identified was the role of the TAC facilitator. To make these workshops effective, the facilitator has to be a person who is open to new ideas, receptive to the feelings and mood of the participants, flexible in adjusting the agenda to accommodate last minute changes in the field, uses games, role playing, and natural language rather than "educationese," and possesses both a good sense of humor and the ability to see the absurdities of life in schools. This last characteristic may seem rather frivolous, but workshop presenters who received good evaluations on the public forms were often derided in private as being "boring and pompous." One school principal confided that he stopped attending the workshops because "they weren't telling me anything I didn't already know, and I don't need to drive 50 miles to be put to sleep." People clearly enjoyed themselves at these workshops, they

laughed and shared stories, and much of the success of these workshops can be traced back to the personal qualities and expertise of the TAC facilitators.

Factors affecting the willingness to change

Another major factor is identifying the person (or persons) responsible for making changes and seeing that they accept the program. An interesting pattern turned up, especially in Alabama, related to recent changes in administrative personnel. In almost every case where districts reported strong support for implementing changes suggested by the workshops, there was also a new person in a key decision making spot, either a new principal, or local Superintendent, or Chapter 1 director. In Alabama, this was true even at the state level, where both the statewide Chapter 1 Coordinator and Chapter 1 evaluator had just assumed these positions. Both were strongly committed to program improvement and they candidly admitted that the persons previously occupying these positions had been opposed to using state money for program improvement. This finding parallels the one reported by Davis (1988) in his case study of three districts participating in the Program Improvement Workshop Series conducted by TAC - Region 4. In his words:

> Dramatic improvement in association with this process is more likely to occur in schools or districts in which a participating leader is relatively new and receptive to taking on a more active role than in a district in which the administrator in either attending to quality issues already, or unwilling to risk breaking out of the traditional style of leadership-by-rule-enforcement (Davis, 1988, p. 6).

The fact that a similar pattern occurred in two quite different regions lends credence to Davis's hypothesis that the Chapter 1 Program Improvement Process "represents a potential political resource for a leader under a limited set of conditions" (1988, p. 6). One limitation is that even if one decision maker is new in the position, support often has to be gained from others who have held their positions for a long time, an example of what one participant called the "hardened bureaucracy." This was the case of one Chapter 1 Coordinator from a very rural, poor district who was anxious to make changes, but who had to contend with a director on the verge of retirement. Although he attended all the sessions, he was unable to gain support to bring a whole team, thereby lessening his chances for making substantive improvements.

A second important factor is an increased emphasis on the role of the Chapter 1 teacher. Several Chapter 1 teachers and supervisors reported that this process helped "validate" their efforts in the classroom. It also provided them with a forum through inclusion on teams to voice their concerns and to have them taken seriously. Several teachers commented that prior to their district's attendance at these workshops, they were not routinely included in the planning process, and were often treated as separate appendages in their schools. The fact that several districts noted that topics of great concern to them were recognition of teacher excellence and the related one of teacher burnout

suggests that the quality of the teaching force in Chapter 1 programs is central to establishing any real changes.

Exemplary vs. Innovative Programs

In addition to helping LEA's improve their Chapter 1 programs, a second objective for TAC was to help SEA's identify exemplary Chapter 1 projects within the state. Part of the information mailed to districts participating in the workshops included a description of the 13 attributes listed by the federal government as characteristics of exemplary programs. While these attributes are certainly behaviors that would characterize excellent programs (in fact, they can be considered exemplary practices for any school program, not just Chapter 1), the question can be raised as to whether these attributes represent truly "innovative" ideas in the sense proposed by Kanter (1983). Here the issue of context becomes very important, because many well funded school districts who can afford to employ their own curriculum development coordinators and research and evaluation personnel already engage in many of these practices. For these districts, the services provided by TAC in the workshops do not break "new" ground; they merely reiterate what the districts are already doing. And even in the case of more rural, less well-funded districts, where many of the workshop topics TAC offered were "new", people were vaguely aware that other alternatives to standard practices were available, or more importantly, they wished there were alternatives because they were dissatisfied with the present state of affairs.

An example based on a long interview conducted in a rural, poor, predominately minority district illustrates this point. After the routine questions had been asked and answered, and the district team (all minority members) began to relax with the evaluator (a white female), the whole tenor of the interview shifted. The Chapter 1 director began to speak of his dreams for the students in the district, and of his desire to "open up their horizons." As he put it, "we've got to do right by our children, because they will be the next generation, and what will this country's future be like if they can't cope?" This same director was also actively engaged in promoting the use of computers for instruction in his Chapter 1 program, because he strongly felt that computer knowledge would be the key to his students' future. Another team member shared her frustration over her grandson's struggle to learn to read, and mused, "there has to be a better way to teach him. He's just not getting these worksheets at all." This same team is the group that went to Toronto for the IRA conference, and came back full of enthusiasm for implementing some of the ideas based on the whole language approach to reading instruction. What became clear as the interview progressed is that these people shared a vision of what education could be like for their students, and that they looked to outside sources like the TAC workshops to give them support in getting their ideas implemented. While this particular district was one of the more enthusiastic supporters of the workshops in that they perceived it "helped open up new vistas", even they looked for something more. As the director said at the end, "What we lack are ideas, not the materials or willingness to change."

Raising this issue had two implications for TAC personnel. One, the interview data revealed that a more careful needs assessment needs to be done at the district level to determine what topics are most useful for that particular district, or even region. While TAC cannot obviously fine tune the

workshops to meet every LEA's unique needs, a better match can be made to ensure that the topics presented do not already duplicate the expertise within the district. And two, if TAC is going to assume the task of providing what Patton (1986) called more "front-end" assistance, then they need to consider whether that role should be limited to simply helping programs become more adept at utilizing existing practices of excellent schools, or whether they should take a more proactive stance in disseminating information about ideas that are on the "cutting edge" of educational research in teaching and learning.

Conclusion

Any qualitative evaluation that is done well raises new questions in addition to addressing the ones posed by the client. And that is because many issues and concerns cannot be anticipated in advance, but are discovered only by entry into the field. One question is focused on the evaluator's role in collecting and analyzing the data. The results of this evaluation suggest that evaluators can play a much stronger role in formative evaluation, especially if they are sensitive to information that uncovers multiple realities in program implementation. As one evaluator of a Chapter 1 program described it:

> I see evaluators being given a role in program development. In this role, we are working side by side with the program personnel in an effort to design and implement a program that works - and works well (Rallis, 1988, p. 29).

A second point to be made is that qualitative methods are useful for uncovering peoples' real reasons for becoming committed to making what in many cases were innovative changes in their program. Unless program administrators have this information, evaluation reports will continue to gather dust on the shelves in bureaucratic offices, and the problems associated with program implementation will not be addressed.

References

Cronbach, L.J., et al. (1980). Toward reform of program evaluation. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Davis, A. (1988, April). Educational change and local context: Chapter I program improvement in three districts. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans.

Kanter, R.M. (1983). The change masters. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Kirkup, G. (1986). The feminist evaluator. In E.R. House (Ed.), New directions in educational evaluation. Philadelphia: Falmer Press.

Patton, M. Q. (1986). Utilization focused evaluation. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage

Rallis, S.F. (1988). Evaluating an old friend: One evaluator's view of the changing role of program evaluator in Chapter 1. Evaluation Practice, 9, 25-30.